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AUTHOR Hsu, Yuehkuei
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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes studies conducted on ethnography and bilingualism that illustrate the occurrence of events in context, conducted using ethnographic methods, thereby permitting a fuller, more in-depth understanding of language acquisition and development. Studies reviewed include examples of English language acquisition by a 5-year-old Taiwanese male, an Australian family raising their children in a bilingual household, bilingual education in a Chinese community, a Mexican-American community in California, and four families in arctic Quebec. Ethnographic studies offer the various forms, functions, and literacy values within the cultural framework. Findings from such studies evidence why ethnographic case study designs have been strongly supported in recent applied bilingual education. (Contains 18 references.) (NAV)

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND BILINGUALISM

Yuehkuei Hsu

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Ethnography and Bilingualism

To gather information, in the field of language and literacy development, researchers have employed a variety of techniques, including ethnography, case studies, and structured interviews (Crago, 1992; Moore, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). To study in-depth how children become literate in a second language, Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton (1990) point out that sociohistorical and anthropological approaches are powerful tools. They assert that through ethnographic methods, researchers can discover links between the specific individual studied and the social and cultural macrostructures (Knupfer, 1992).

Wolcott (1987) reminds us that characteristically ethnography discerns cultural patterning in the behavior observed; ethnography is much more than simple description. Yin (1989) further stresses that ethnography allows an investigation to have the "holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events -- such as individual life cycles" (p. 14). Following Vygotsky's view of learning as a social activity, ethnographers can closely observe how an individual interacts with people and environment in a literacy activity within certain domains. Close observation, according to Kaur and Mills (1993), is particularly important when studying language learning. Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) maintains that development proceeds in a spiral, passing through the same point at each new revolution while moving on to a higher level. Research in bilingualism during the last decade has also shown that development in a second language proceeds in such a spiral, similar to first language development (Knupfer, 1992).

Huang and Hatch (1978) studied the English language acquisition of a 5-year old Taiwanese boy. They found that the child omitted the English verbs and articles in sentences where they are optional and generally omitted in Chinese. Huang and Hatch conjectured that this tendency may be partially attributed to his language background. Similarly, Hakuta (1987) indicated that children learning English with Japanese or Korean

as their first language tend to have difficulty with English articles which do not exist in their first language system.

Using an ethnographic case study of an Australian family trying to raise their children bilingually, Saunders (1982) examined motives for creating bilingualism, infant bilingualism, children's communications strategies, role-playing, story-telling, code switching, literacy activity in different contexts, biliteracy, and resources in developing bilingualism. After studying the family for an eight-year period, Saunders (1982) indicated that children's acquisition of bilingualism is much more likely to be normal, positive, rewarding, and enriching for both children and their parents.

In his study of a Hispanic community, Anderson (1982) examined the kinds and frequency of literacy events, and the participants involved in the events. Particularly, he emphasized the importance of identifying the types of literacy events to which children are exposed in print and in adult-child interaction. He suggested that literacy events in this community were used in functional ways by families which linked them to the larger society.

Guthrie's study (1985) of bilingual education in a Chinese community in California considered the classroom, the school, and the broader community as a whole. Using a multilevel ethnographic approach, this study documented the ways that a bilingual education program was initiated, implemented, and perceived in a Chinese community. The research findings indicated the need for long-term participant observation and ethnographic interviewing in the target school and community, the educational perspectives of the community residents and their interaction between the school and the community.

Similarly, Delgado-Gaitan's (1990) study of a Mexican-American community in Portillo, California yielded four major findings. First, literacy activities observed through interaction provide a view of sociocultural coherence, which affirms families' roles as motivators in their children's education. Second, although Mexican parents care about their children's education, they often do not have the necessary skills required by schools.

Third, the parents' involvement in the community makes their participation more meaningful. Finally, the lack of communication between parents and the school may explain why some parents also experience isolation and frustration in dealing with schools.

Crago (1992), in a longitudinal ethnographic study of four children and their families in arctic Quebec, investigated the role of cultural context in the communicative interactions of young Eskimo children and their caregivers. The findings emphasized the sociocultural aspects of communicative interaction in second language acquisition.

Utilizing ethnographic methods, the above studies illustrate the occurrence of events in contexts, helping us to have a fuller and more in-depth understanding of language acquisition and development. Researchers and educators point out that informal, naturalistic observation, one of the ethnographic methods, is the most effective and positive way to learn about children's language and their way of learning (Goodman, Y, 1985; Watson, 1985). Haussler (1985) agrees, maintaining that an ethnographic case study is an "in-depth analysis of one child's development" (p. 74). Children's learning patterns emerge after being repeatedly observed and questioned. As Wallat and Green (1984) point out, an ethnographic perspective for looking at language acquisition allows us to view both children and adults as active significant participants in the making of literate learners. What ethnographic studies have portrayed are the various forms, functions, and literacy values within a cultural framework. The previous studies indicate why ethnographic case study designs have been strongly supported recently in applied bilingual education.

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